

Yellow is mellow in Days of Blunder

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

In Top Gun, Tom Cruise plays an arrogant egomaniac baby-man-child who recklessly flies multi-million-dollar supersonic jet planes, in-between womanising and letting the audience know he's the king of the world (please stretch this last word out to occupy ten seconds yourself). Much like Jack Dawson only with no sense of comedic hyperbole. We lapped it up probably because we so desperately wanted to be Maverick and were too young to appreciate what a cult-warped nutcase Tom Cruise is.



Four years later Tom rehashed the gimmick, making stock cars the new focus. 'Cole Trickle' is a rookie racing car driver who has only ever *watched* NASCAR on TV, yet assumes he can plug any gaps in his knowledge/experience/skill with trademark Cruise swagger bravado cobbler to become the Daytona 500 champion. Tom is an established USAC open-wheel racing champion so isn't totally green around the gills. Nonetheless, since that doesn't help me make him look quite so bigoted I'm not even going to mention it. I should point out that open-wheel cars are single-seater formula varieties where the wheels stretch out beyond the body for stability reasons.

Harry Hogge: What do you know about stock car racing?

Cole Trickle: Well... watched it on television, of course.

Harry Hogge: You've seen it on television?

Cole Trickle: ESPN. The coverage is excellent, you'd be surprised at how much you can pick up.

Harry Hogge: I'm sure I would.

Subtlety isn't in his repertoire. He's even called 'Cole' Trickle, which when pronounced with a southern American drawl sounds remarkably like *Cool* Trickle. This is a hat-tip towards Dick Trickle, a genuine NASCAR driver, not an STD symptom it should be noted. Why would you abbreviate Richard to Dick when your surname is Trickle? He committed suicide by gunshot wound in 2013 aged 71 having been tipped over the edge by an untreatable chronic pain condition. Given the circumstances, his name was likely the least of his concerns.

Names aside, Cole's character was actually based on former NASCAR driver, Tim Richmond.

Cole Trickle: Claire, I'm more afraid of bein' nothing than I am of being hurt.



He needn't have worried. You know you've made it when you're the star of your own ZX Spectrum game!

As in *Top Gun*, Cole *cruises* into town on a Harley wearing movie superstar Aviators, making big promises only one man can conceivably cash in, no matter what the insurmountable odds may be. A young, conceited upstart who'll deliver come rain or shine, win the pin-up supermodel's heart, and tear off into the sunset with wild abandon and a bank balance almost as burgeoning as his unbearable narcissistic pomposity.



I'd mention the other people in it only I couldn't make out their faces, bleached under the glow of Tom's beaming

charisma. I wonder if he was responsible for the TomTom GPS company, or a member of new wave band, Tom Tom Club.

This time it's different - we're older and wiser and have seen it all before so are less susceptible to the wily charms of returning producers, Don Simpson and Jerry Bruckheimer, and director, Tony Scott. It's no wonder Days of Thunder has Top Gun stamped all over it. Can't we just watch Born on the Fourth of July or Rain Man instead? Cruise was fantastic in both. Aww, damn it.

Plus, battered Chevrolets aren't a fraction as thrilling as military-grade F-14 Tomcats, especially when it's impossible to ignore the niggling sensation that you're being force-fed a 108-minute NASCAR commercial, further sullied with support from a dozen crowbarred in product placement sponsors. We see beyond dreamy wish fulfilment, the seductive caress of sweeping, sunset lit cinematography and Hans Zimmer's vividly heroic musical score to see Days of Thunder for what it is; another shallow exercise in polishing Tom's fragile ego. Well, *some* of us did anyway. Days of Thunder still raked in \$157.9m at the box office. As a side-line, deals with Matchbox and various other licensees swelled the coffers further... minus Cruise's \$9m fee.

Tim Daland: I had sponsors in from all over the coast and I'm hugging, and holding hands, and praying for a good showin'. And what do we do? We end up looking like a monkey f**king a football out there. Everybody out, please.

Making the movie just about tolerable, Robert Duval lands what is *possibly* the performance of his career playing Cole's washed-up last-chance-saloon track manager, Harry Hogge. There are plenty of strong contenders in his filmography to debate! Robert shares as much screen time as Tom,

outshining him at every opportunity with memorable one-liners and illuminating mannerisms.



Harry Hogge: Cole, you're wandering all over the track!

Cole Trickle: Yeah, well this son of a bitch just slammed into me.

Harry Hogge: No, no, he didn't slam you, he didn't bump you, he didn't nudge you... he *rubbed* you. And rubbin', son, is racin'.

It's also interesting to see Nicole Kidman in one of her earlier roles, dating back to a dim and distant period when she was still Australian. Nicole suggested that studying neurosurgery would help to convince the audience of her 'brain doctor'

medical credentials, yet the request was dismissed as a waste of time and she had to wing it. She's believable regardless, although isn't given much material to work with, largely relegated to 'love interest' status. Feisty, certainly no doormat for Tom to wipe his feet on, though her best roles were yet to come.



Dr Claire Lewicki is initially objectified, mistaken for another prank hooker, much to Cole's excruciating embarrassment. Brushing aside Cole's sexist antics/sexual abuse, Claire isn't remotely fazed, while watching the same scene thirty years later in the wake of the 'me too' movement, the audience is likely to be squirming far more. Just when we thought nothing could top the awkwardness of that earlier phoney police 'arrest' scene involving a real prostitute who'd been presented on a plate for Tom like an after-dinner mint.

(Cole is being searched by a female trooper who notices he has an erection)

Female Trooper: Looks like we found something.

Male Trooper: What's that?

Female Trooper: A concealed weapon.

If you were introduced to the movie via the Commodore Amiga 500 'Screen Gems' pack sold between September 1990 and July 1991, you'll be aware that Days of Thunder was converted into an (allegedly) playable, vector-based first-person perspective racing game.

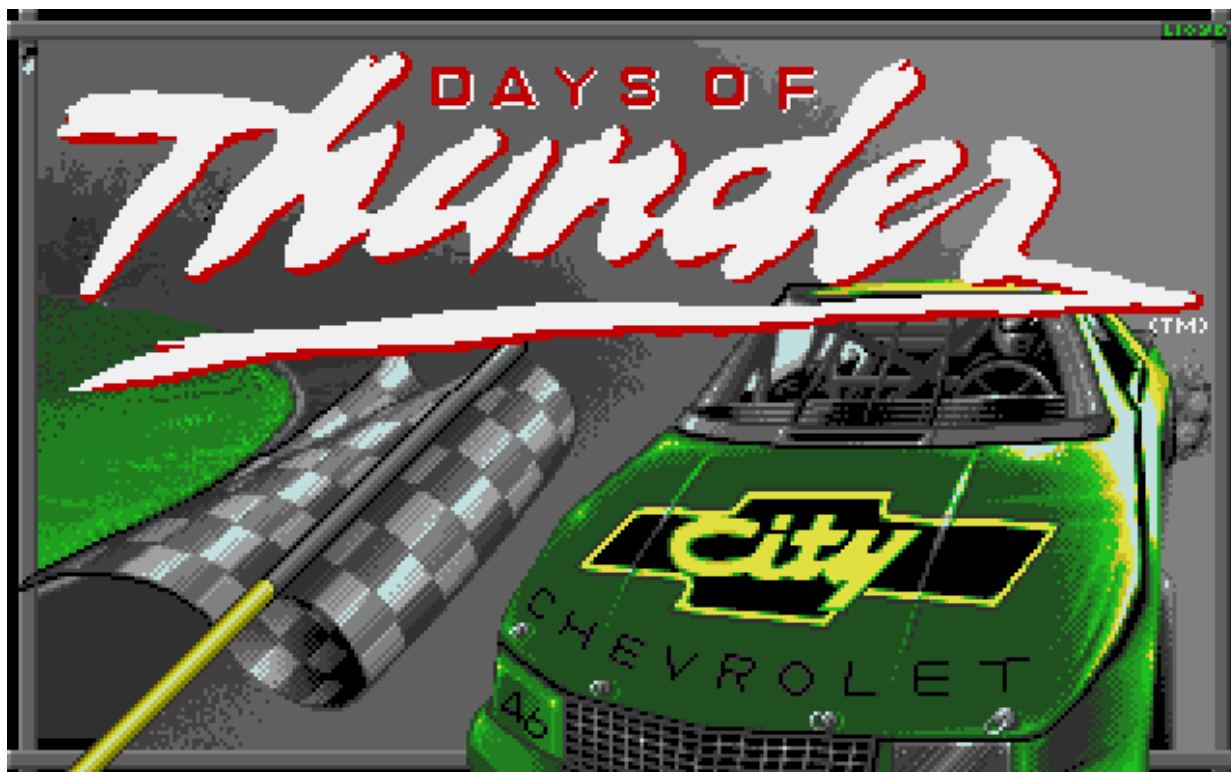


If not, there were plenty of alternative mechanisms for it to haunt your dreams; the Atari ST, DOS PCs, Spectrum, Game Boy, Commodore 64 and NES. Amstrad owners were let off

the hook on account of no-one owning one except Alan Sugar.



Creative Materials were behind the Amiga version published by Mindscape; without beating around the track, it's a car crash smashed into a derailed train wreck, landing on a sinking Titanic.



The car's the star in pixel land. If only the rest of the game looked as good as Lloyd Baker's title screen.

What first strikes us is that Mindscape were very careful to subvert our belief that Tom Cruise was involved in the movie. He doesn't feature on the box, in the manual or in the game itself, suggesting that his likeness wasn't part of the licensing deal Mindscape signed with Paramount Pictures. Fair enough - he doesn't get out of bed for less than \$10 zillion so it would have been a non-starter to bring him on board. Movie stars generally didn't get involved in game development back then, particularly on computer-based platforms where budgets were often minuscule.

This shouldn't in any way preclude Days of Thunder from being a decent racing simulator. When would we see Tom anyway? During a few two-second cutscenes?

Harry *does* honour us with his presence in the C64 version, although it's only by way of simple text telegrams. The rest is left to our imagination.





Dr Claire Lewicki: Tell me what you love so much about racing.

Cole Trickle: Speed. To be able to control it. To know that I can control something that's out of control.

More of a deal-breaker is the speed, or rather *lack* of it. There may well have been grounds on which to sue Mindscape over the 200mph claims made on the box! 'Jack the Bear' certainly won't be putting in an appearance so 'drafting' and 'slingshotting' are definitely out of the question. I'd explain how all this works except I'm all out of Sweet 'n' Low and Nicole Kidman is busy filming The Prom.

As I can't improve on ST Format's admonishment that the engine "sounds like a budgie with a strangulated hernia" I won't delve further into the audio on offer.

Cole Trickle: Tim, I realize Harry's been around a long time. I'm not sayin' that his ways are antiquated but it'd help to have a car that handled properly and didn't blow engines.

Harry Hogge: Well if he wouldn't get excited and over-rev the son-of-a-bitch the engine wouldn't blow. Now, Cole, when you shift the gear and that little needle on the tach goes into the red and reads 9000 RPMs, that's BAD.



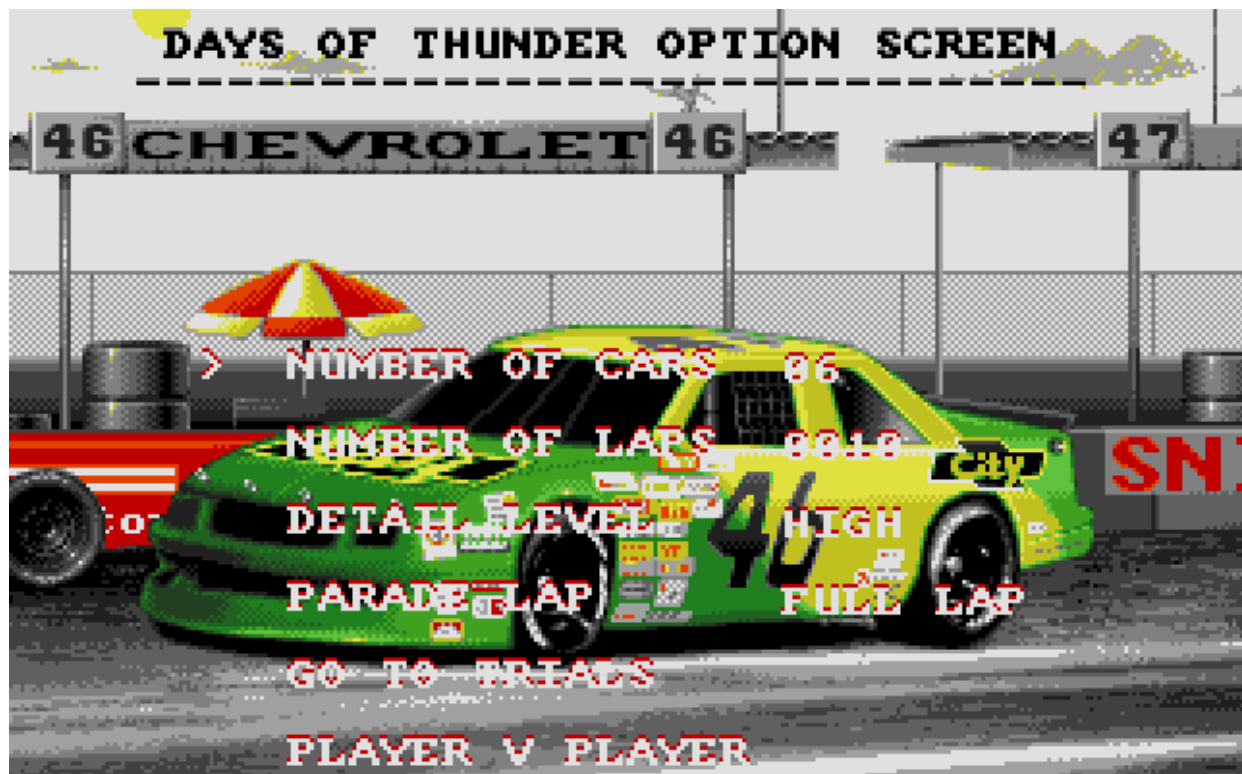
Operating at what feels like 5fps, we may as well be riding in a tin bath on wheels, rolling through the Yorkshire Dales to put some distance between us and the wrath of Nora Batty and her formidable rolling pin bludgeon. You'd need to drink a heck of a lot of Summer Wine to make you a danger in one of Mindscape's stock cars!

Dr Claire Lewicki: Control is an illusion, you infantile egomaniac. Nobody knows what's gonna happen next: not on a freeway, not in an airplane, not inside our own bodies and certainly not on a racetrack with 40 other infantile egomaniacs.

There are five gears to cycle through, yet they seem to make no difference to our revometer or rate of acceleration. Turning is another uphill battle through indurating treacle. Without the luxury of three days' worth of forward planning, we plough uncontrollably into the bank, advertising hoardings or stadium, wreck the car and end up having to work for a living instead. No wonder there are no spectators. Who'd want to waste their time watching such a feeble non-event? Oh wait, that's just in practice mode... all most people will have experienced.



It's possible to reduce the level of graphical detail to improve the game's frame rate. Nevertheless, in reality, doing so fails to make a negligible difference to either factor.

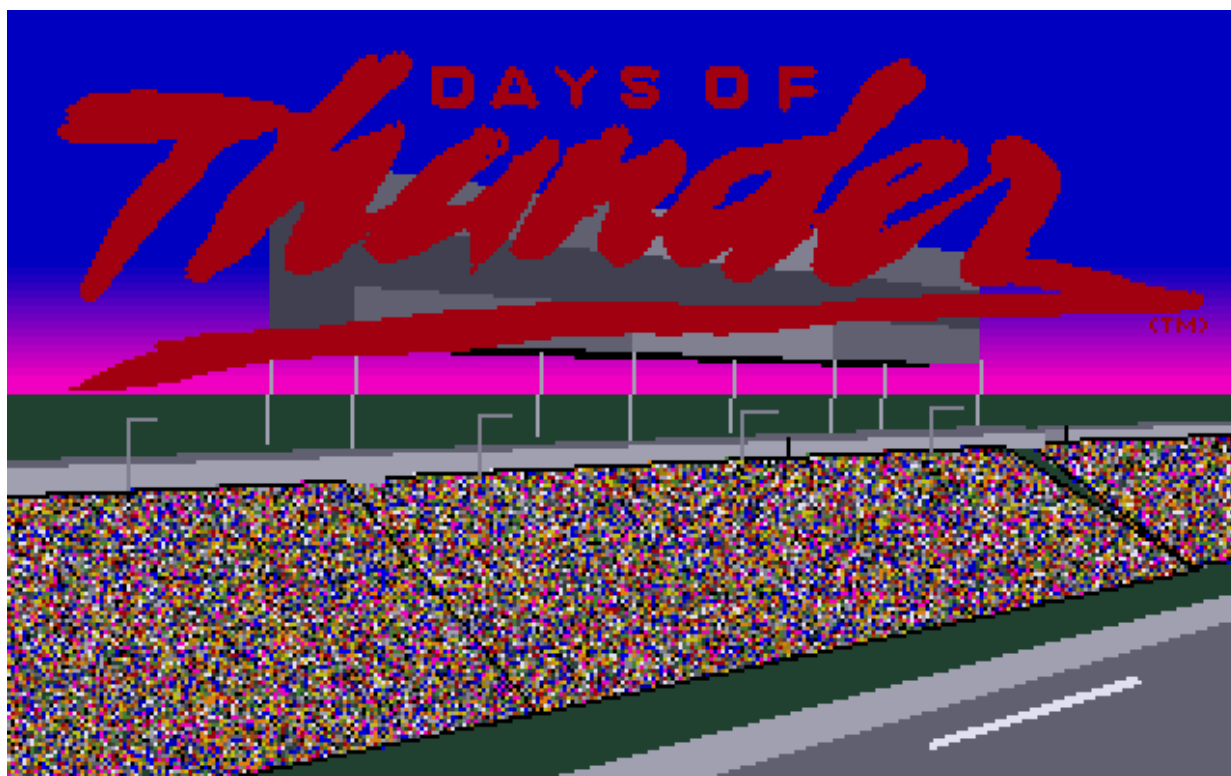


You'd think the solution in today's world with its easy access to exceptionally evolved emulators would be to configure it to work on an Amiga 4000 with a squiggledy-pop of every variety of memory known to Commodore. True, this works perfectly if all you hope to play is the Guru Meditation game that's built into every Amiga system for gratis. Setting my sights drastically lower, I managed to get Days of Thunder to run on an Amiga 1200 with plenty of memory, though that barely improved the game's performance or my mental health.

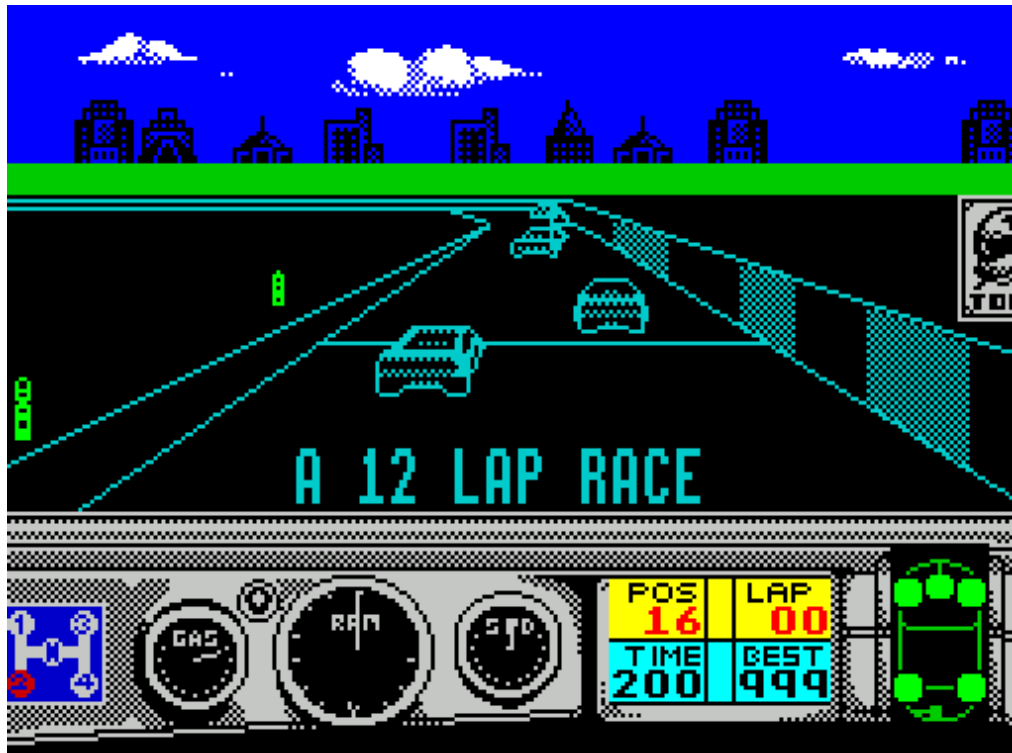


More of a DOS-stop. Nevermind, you get the gist.

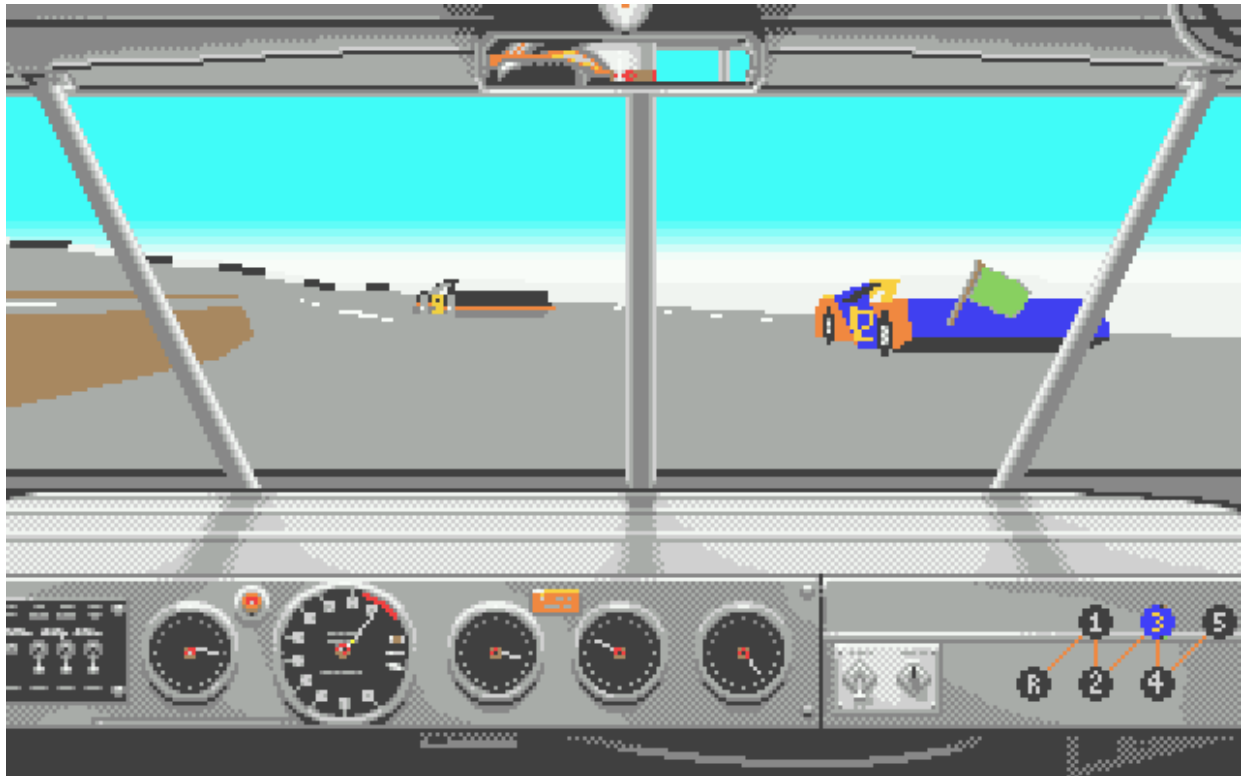
Those essential pitstops would have to work miracles to even approach redressing the balance. Somehow, however, I suspect that extra fuel, a change of tires and marginally tweaked steering precision isn't going to scratch the surface.



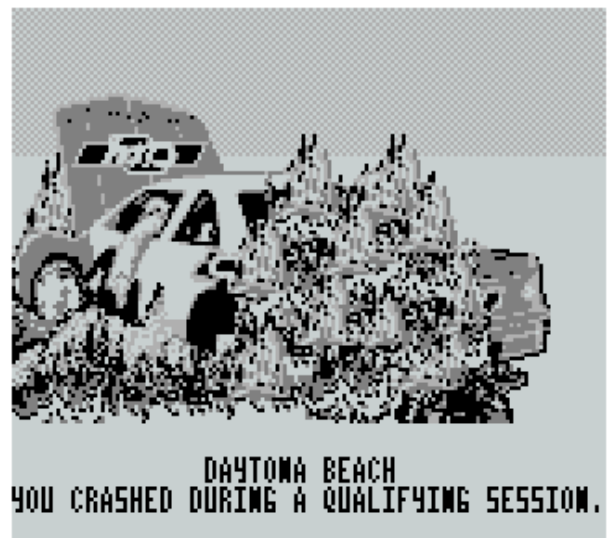
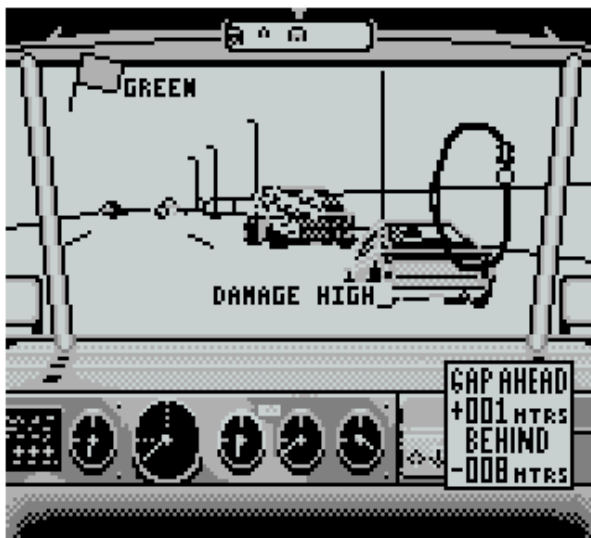
Once qualified to take part in the main event, there are five circuits on which we can race, adopted from the real world; Daytona, Phoenix, Atlanta, Charlotte and Talladega. One less than on the Speccy rendition by Tiertex strangely enough. This one is viewed from *behind* the car (a third-person perspective), adding Bristol and Dover tracks, whilst dropping Talladega.



Meanwhile, back on the Amiga, our options are to compete against the computer's AI, or a friend running another Amiga or Atari ST via the null-modem cable. Though if I'd paid money for this twoddle I don't think I'd be drawing attention to the mistake by inviting anyone else to be a witness to my stupidity. They wouldn't remain a friend for very long had I inflicted this on them.



Argonaut Software who developed the Game Boy (and PC) version designed a similar head to head system, activated by connecting two handhelds via a link cable. Maybe when expectations are lower it's passable as a game.



According to Argonaut boss, Jez San, "Days of the Thunder on Gameboy is designed to be playable above everything else. It's fast-moving and the first-person perspective is very novel for a Gameboy title. It's great fun to play". Then he *would* say that; his next pay cheque depended on it selling.

What's staggering is that Days of Thunder actually received several extremely positive reviews from the games magazine fraternity too. Were they playing the same game? Had they been bribed with strippers dressed as doctors and police officers? It's a complete mystery. I've played the IPF version too, so the radical gulf between my experience and theirs can't be explained by a bad crack.

"Apart from one resounding oversight - no mouse control option - and poor sounds, Days of Thunder is excellent. The control methods take some getting used to, but patient training reaps great rewards. Action and excitement are there by the bucketload once you can hold your own in a race. Days of Thunder is fast enough to entice you on. Racers (and even Sunday drivers) can't afford to miss this one!"

ST Format (88%, November 1990)



"Okay, so what's the most important thing a race game needs? Good filled-in vector graphics? Massive roaring sound effects? Clever multiple 'camera' angles? Well, Days Of Thunder has all these.

Colourful and realistic yellow cars that zoom and slice and career into you. Screeching brakes, howling engines and rumbling rev noises. Above, airship, behind, track-

side and audience views, all at the press of a key. But does this game have the race game 'feel'?

Yes, it does! The handling is very smooth and responsive. The car bundles about the track at a fair old pace and the impression of speed is excellent. You can really feel exhilarated as you streak neck and neck, bumper to bumper, with the evil orange car, trying desperately to overtake it before the bend comes up.

Handling tends to become a bit iffy, however, when you unexpectedly leave the road. In seconds you lose all speed and are left floundering in fifth, howling with frustration as you try to get going again. If that's annoying, then getting cut up by the car behind is double extra bloody annoying. Two jostling cars can become stuck together and often you get shredded to bits before you can wrestle free.

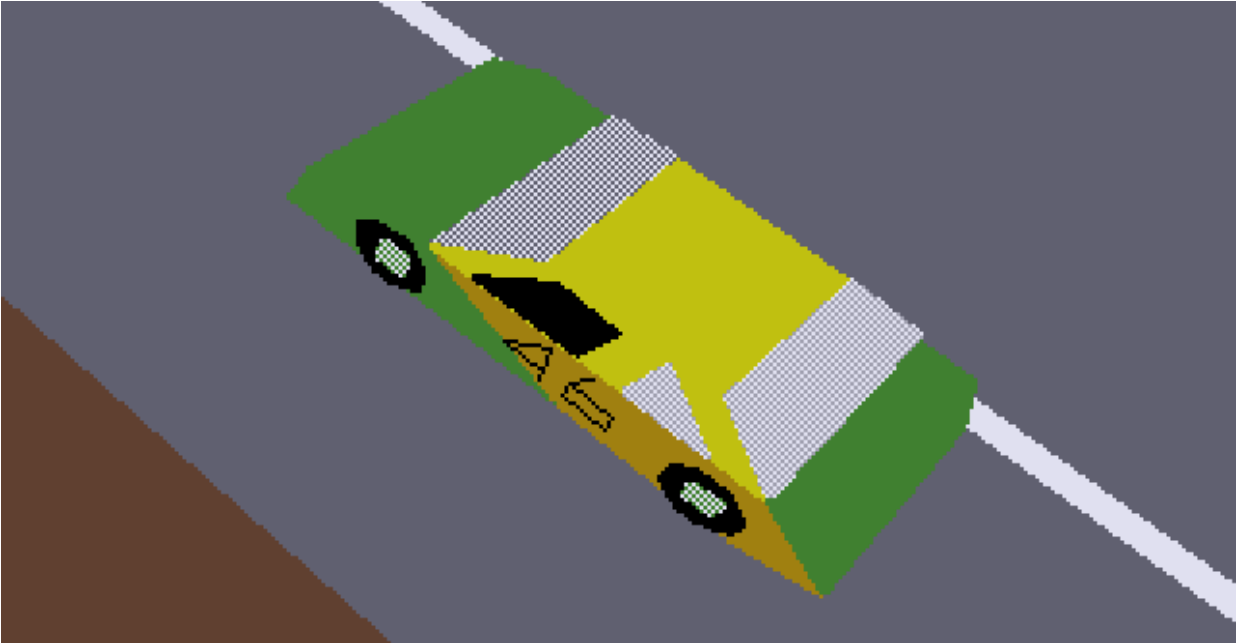
But the graphics are pleasant, even though the audience in the grandstand look like those multi-coloured sprinkly bits you put on cupcakes. The action's pretty frenzied (until you select over twenty competitors, then it gets a bit sloooow). And there's a modem link, allowing player-to-player races. And... good grief, there's the bottom of the page!"

Zero (80%, issue 12, October 1990)



At least Amiga Computing (see issue 32, January 1991) had their heads screwed on the right way...

"The graphics are not that great to be honest. On High Detail, there simply isn't that much detail and the game is fairly pedestrian. On Low Detail there's hardly any and the game moves at a reasonable lick. The 3D stuff is average with only the pics of the bars being notable. No Tom Cruise either.



Whatever the title music is, I hope it isn't supposed to have come from the film. It does sound vaguely familiar but that is probably because David Whittaker writes an awful lot of music. Sound effects otherwise are adequate.

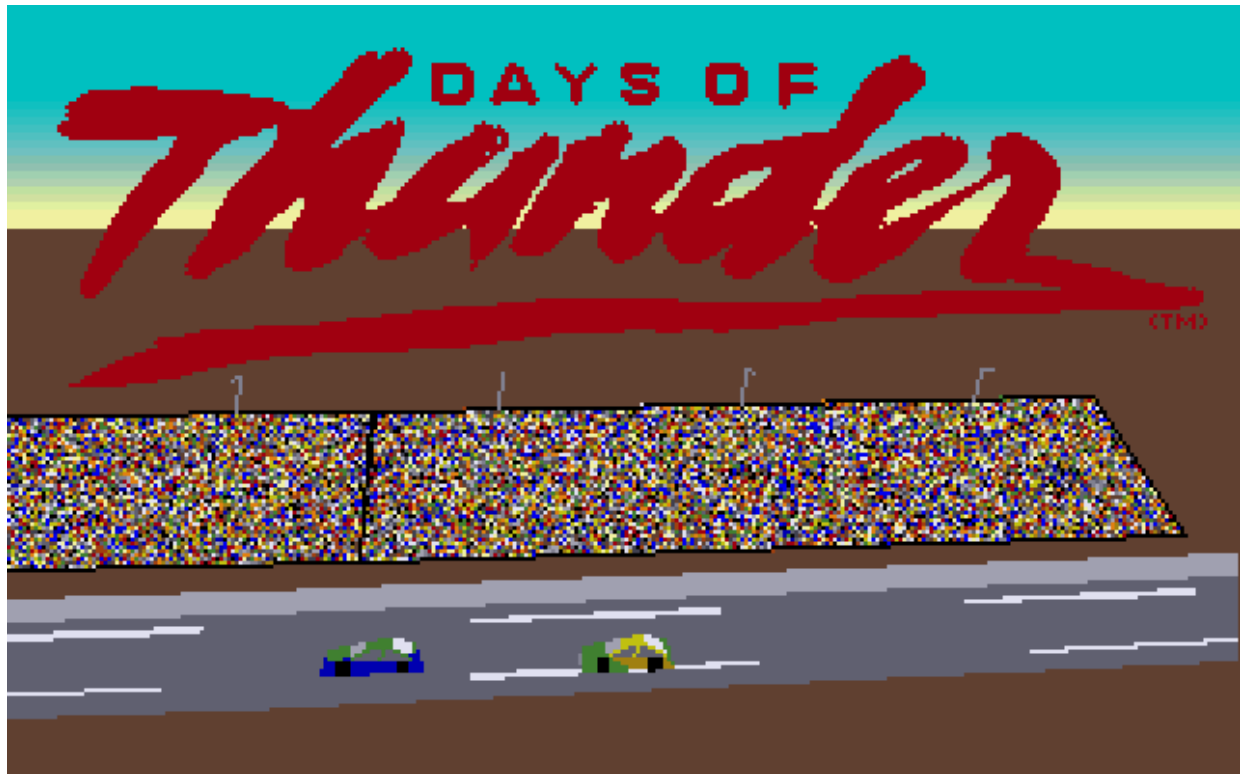
Gameplay is sort of a cross between Stunt Car Racer and Indianapolis 500, but not as good as either. Sluggish until you turn down the detail, it then lacks atmosphere. A reasonable driving game, naturally fun when going head to head with a friend, but there are opportunities missed a-plenty in this film conversion."

More crucially, where's the wheelchair racing bonus stage and joystick-wagglng trackside foot race? Here, have some commiseratory moral support...



Proving me wrong again, Zzap! also took off the blinkers to drive home a fair and accurate assessment (36%, issue 69, January 1991).

"You'll have days of boredom playing the Amiga version. As with Indy 500, driving round an oval track soon gets tedious. Unlike that game, though, there's very little challenge to keep you playing. Robin got through to the last race in a few hours, only to be disqualified by a parade lap glitch." - Phil King



"Nope, I don't know what went wrong but all the thrills and spills of 200 mph Stock Car racing have been reduced to 20 mph or so in the Amiga Days. With a totally unconvincing illusion of speed and barely adequate 3-D car shapes, it just fails miserably to capture anything like the pace of the real thing - the graphical detail level option adding nothing to speed it up. Hard Drivin's got the realism, the convincing 3-D effect and speed to beat this. With a very weak Dave Whittaker soundtrack, as well, Days just doesn't get off the starting grid." - Robin Hogg

"Unconvincing speed effect and far too repetitive to capture the thrills and spills of stock car racing."



Further alternative perspectives are to be found in-*game*... in the form of camera angles that is, switched between using the function keys. There's the skycam, trackside, bank straight, grandstand, and Cruise view, which entails half the screen being obscured by some anonymous racing car driver's helmet-hidden head.



There's even a secret flight mode, enabled via a cheat: pause the game then type 'comeflywithme'. Fire then accelerates whilst forward and backward motion controls altitude. At least that's the theory. In practice, *flying* Chevies handle as lethargically obstinate as *grounded* ones. View is toggled as usual using the function keys.

Well, that's appropriate considering several notable figures in the racing biz have dismissed the events and techniques depicted in Days of Thunder as inaccurate dramatisation. To be expected, of course, this is Hollywood hyperbole, not a 'fly on the wall' documentary.

It wouldn't have helped that shooting commenced before the script was finished. Hence much of the dialogue had to be cobbled together on the spot with lines written on cue cards attached to Tom's windscreen, or fed directly into an earpiece for him to recite.



I can only imagine the game was constructed in a similar fashion, the developers flying by the seat of their pants to nail an unfeasible deadline whilst the movie remained topical.

Adopting such an approach for the movie resulted in characters riffing hick-bluster gibberish, contradicting themselves within the space of a single sentence. Interspersed throughout is genuine technical racing terminology, lending a sense of authenticity to the proceedings. It's easy to swallow if you know nothing about the real sport portrayed, yet sadly this fails to make it any more enticing. How many times can you parade a few dozen stock cars whizzing around the same stretches of tarmac and maintain the audience's attention?

You can disguise much mediocrity by speeding up footage in combination with rapid hard cuts and simmering motion blur effects. That would have been tricky to mirror using 3D

vector technology on the Amiga in 1990 so what you see is what you get. A broken game that couldn't hope to be salvaged by 11th-hour code fix bandages. More like seconds of bleeps than Days of Thunder.

